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Lambert-Heggs, Wendy

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# The 'F' word: conflicts and tensions in a community of practice when mentors confront the possibility of failing a trainee in teaching observations

Wendy Lambert-Heggs

University of Plymouth  
Peninsula CETT

## Abstract

The central feature of this research focuses on the sensitive stage of trainee assessment made by the mentor on the third and fourth teaching practice observation at the end of stage one of the full-time pre-service PGCE/Cert Ed Initial Teacher Training programmes, which incorporate the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS). Wenger's (2003) 'social learning' theory and his notion of community of practice have been used with other concepts as lenses in an analysis of practice. Particular attention is paid to the temporal developmental stages of the trainee in relation to the sequencing of the observations and the effects of the 'positioning' (Burr, 2010: pp. 111 - 14) of mentors. This analysis reviews three cases and specifically explores the mentor's perspective from retrospective reflections encompassing their feelings and decisions, highlighting tensions caused by the need to balance the 'twin roles as enabler and assessor' of their mentee's teaching practice (Claxton et al, 1996: p. 244).

## Key words

Mentor; Community of Practice; Positioning; Initial Teacher Training; Lifelong Learning Sector.

## Introduction

A critical component within the full-time pre-service Postgraduate Certificate in Education/Certificate in Education (PGCE/Cert Ed) Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes, which incorporate the DTLLS, and the inspiration for this paper are the four teaching practice observations which are assessed and graded 'pass' or 'fail' by the mentor. This article discusses a range of issues that emerged from observations carried out in three organisations where each mentor was confronted with the possibility of failing a trainee teacher's practice at a critical point in the programme. The paper specifically explores the mentor's perspective and the tensions they felt when confronting the possibility of failing a trainee. As Ball puts it, 'teaching has always involved making decisions within a complex and a rich field of contradictions, dilemmas and priorities' (Ball, 2006: p. 83). This article reviews only three cases so wider generalised application is clearly limited. However, this research has resulted in some useful insights into the tensions when confronting a possible failed practice by the mentor.

## Theoretical position

Decisions to pass or fail a trainee could be viewed through the dynamics of social action between all participants in teacher training within each organisation, each constructed within its own culture. In relation to this, I have used Wenger's (2003) 'social learning' approach, primarily as a framework for understanding the integration between social actions with participants involved in the assessment of teaching practice observations. However, other theories are engaged in the discourse to provide further insight and dimensions of understanding, such as Burr's ideas on 'positioning' (Burr, 2010: p. 113). Thus, while Wenger's (2003) approach frames the discussion, other approaches have been 'blended' (Hughes et al, 2007: p. 5), and are used with limited application.

Wenger's (2003) idea of a 'community of practice' is a metaphorical concept which emerged from the social sciences in recent years. It attempts to explain human interaction in social relationships constituted as communities of practice in the context of 'situated learning' (in situ). Wenger's view is that learning evolves through participation in a community of practice rather than learning being essentially an individual endeavour. He suggests that it is mainly a social phenomenon and it is this that frames his theory, as he focuses on the interactions of social practice and identity, and the practical implications of these processes. Wenger's criteria for this notion of community aligns well to the issues under this review, as he discusses a range of ideas including meaning, practice as community, practice as learning, practice as boundary, practice as locality, and knowing in practice. He suggests that meaning is the implicit goal of social action and this understanding comes about through a process of negotiation derived from participation and reification, and that this enables us to learn and our identities emerge.

According to Wenger (2003: p. 55), 'participation refers to the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and being active in social enterprises'. However, he maintains that the process of reification involves treating abstraction as though it had substance and existed, whereas participation involves living in the world and interacting with others. Both of these constructs are not opposites but work in concert to provide meaning. Therefore, if one acknowledges that teachers hold tacit knowledge, then by interacting with others through this social action of sharing notes in a negotiated understanding of ideas, the tacit 'knowing in practice' is revealed and reified, and is no longer undefined. Wenger (2003) suggests that a community of practice can be defined as a negotiation of meaning with three dimensions: first, 'mutual engagement', a negotiated enterprise among other

members; second, 'joint enterprise' or a common endeavour; and third, a 'shared repertoire' or ways of doing things (Wenger, 2003: pp. 76, 77, and 82). With regard to this paper, however, although reification is an elusive concept, it is still useful in that reification through Wenger's lens is achieved through those various forms of engagement that permit us to become whoever we are.

Wenger's (2003) principles for such a community are that there needs to be practice that involves participation in relation to others; a collective process where actions and meanings are negotiated with one another in a joint enterprise creating mutual accountability. He suggests that this involves participants' biographical history, their language, experiences and that all these are resources for negotiating meanings, for example '*comparing notes*' (Wenger, 2003: p. 85). Some of these terms and others are used throughout this paper to try to make sense of issues faced by members within a community of practitioners specifically engaged in confronting the possibility of failing a trainee in their teaching practice. Should this happen, the process of reification is interrupted with serious consequences for the recipient and the giver.

Therefore, by imagining there is a community of practice of participants in teacher training, using the three dimensions identified above, players ideally negotiate and take part with one another in '*mutual engagement*' and '*negotiation of meanings [in a] joint enterprise of mutual accountability*' (Wenger, 2003: p. 73). In reality, although Wenger acknowledges that there are tensions and conflicts, as revealed later, I believe that he over-simplifies the issues of community, particularly those positioned at the margins where practice is not always congruent with reified structures. However, Wenger's lens provides a useful tool with which to examine these social situations. Among other things, it reveals that participation between mentors and tutors needs a more elaborate negotiation in order to achieve meaning in the judgement of practice, to gain coherence and reify aspects of remedial work in assessment of teaching practice observations. In this paper I use some of Wenger's ideas to explain social action, but in order to do justice to his theory, a far greater analysis is warranted than the scope of this paper.

### Methodology

In the assessment of practice it appeared that there were unexpected ambiguities and uncertainties in procedural trajectories, especially in relation to the professional judgements and protocols involved in failing a trainee's practice. The aims of this paper therefore were to add to the body of knowledge and understanding in the area of assessing teaching practice specifically by mentors. Qualitative data was gathered from two questionnaires and correspondence from a third mentor who all agreed to take part in the research. It is important to note that this paper was drawn from an autobiographical genre, a biographical narrative in the spirit of reflexive ethnography through which my lens identified my professional life and the culture of the world at the time I inhabited where, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000: p. 740) write, '*personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study*'. As the researcher I selected information from various comments made by mentors, influencing, as Wenger (2003) suggests, '*what to say and what to leave out*'. Burr (2010: p. 4) claims from her '*social constructivism*' approach that '*we should not assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better, in terms of being nearer the truth, than other ways*'. The notion of truth is therefore a problematic term and I offer this as my version of what has transpired and no more than that. As Sarantakos (1997: p. 36) states, '*Reality is not objective but subjective; reality is what people see it to be*'.

Thus the work has been mainly informed by the questionnaires and correspondence from the mentors, but also by using Wenger's (2003) social learning approach and ideas drawn from Burr (2010) and social constructionism, as lenses to interpret the data. Further it should be noted that this work is a snapshot from data derived from three cases, which have recently emerged from practice, although others have since transpired so the data is therefore incomplete. That said, I felt at the time that this research would reveal useful ideas that could improve the quality of our provision but wider generalised application will clearly be limited and further research is required.

### Mentors confronting a possible fail of a teaching practice observation

In response to a consultative paper, issued by the DfES (2003), setting out their vision for ITT in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS), the proposals for reform were set out in '*Equipping our Teachers for the Future; Reforming Initial Teacher Training for the Learning and Skills Sector*' (DfES, 2004). Among many others, the proposals included references to the mentoring of teachers in the workplace and in addition the policy recommended:

*'The teacher training team...decide when and by whom these observations take place, in order to support the trainee's learning most effectively.'*

(DfES, 2004: p. 8)

The teaching team consisted of academic tutors from the university who were responsible for the delivery of the programme and the first and last two teaching observations. A major part of this discussion explores the antecedents and outcomes for some of the participants involved in failing an observation, particularly when failed by the mentor. In relation to the rewriting of the new PGCE/Cert Ed programme, what was not recognised at the time was the critical significance of the revised sequencing of observations by practitioners, as the training progressed.

In relation to the PGCE/Cert. Ed. programme under analysis, and because the mentor observations take place at a critical stage in the programme, there would appear to be an uneven weight of responsibility which is determined by the stage of the programme in which assessments take place. The third and fourth observations occur at a point in the course where decisions have to be made about the likelihood of the trainee achieving a successful outcome by continued membership of the programme. This has created new concerns and tensions among the mentors.

This paper reveals the increasing ambiguities in interpretations in assessing trainee teachers, due to the changes made in the sequencing of the observations. An unintended consequence of these changes left the mentor with greater exposure than university tutors to the unpleasant task of failing an observation.

The comments below reveal some of the emotional elements stated by mentors who, while subjected to the same procedures to maintain transparency and parity across the programme, adopted different strategies when confronted with a possible fail.

**Case 1.** *The mentor said that he felt “frustrated” and had passed all the trainees’ observations by “extensive pre-observation support”. Therefore the passes were anticipated...[Because there were several] ‘trial runs’ and he continued by saying “without any one of these steps I feel that all the observations could easily have been failures”.*

**Case 2.** *The mentor decided not to carry out the observation and passed it to another colleague whose subject specialism was similar to the trainees. The mentor told me personally that she would feel “professionally compromised” if she carried out the observation because her previous engagements with the trainee had been frequently negative.*

**Case 2.** Subsequently failed the trainee’s fourth observation and wrote that the observer “wants you to know that he was distressed to write these things but we feel that honesty is the best policy”.

**Case 3.** *The mentor did fail the fourth observation but said that the experience was “quite unsettling and distracting to my own teaching and life”.*

As Wenger identifies:

*‘Procedures hide broader meanings in blind sequences of operations...Knowledge of a formula can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the process.’*

(2003: p. 61)

Wenger’s (2003) lens offers some explanation for dislocations in understanding programme documentation and he suggests that the sharing of artefacts is ‘*the work of alignment*’ (p. 187), a term he uses for a multi-membership community which needs to reconcile boundary practices. These were increasingly blurred by the imperatives attached to the new programme and the new lexicon of training. In relation to this PGCE/Cert Ed programme, although there was a dissemination of various printed guidelines, with an initial joint observation carried out by a tutor and mentor, tacit meanings were not sufficiently explicit and established an overemphasis in approach that tended to be diagnostic, developmental and supportive, inadvertently often allowing poor practice which continued too long into the second term. This can be seen in the following mentor’s comment:

**Case 1.** *“As a mentor I feel that my roles are to be supportive, focus on positive feedback and constructive criticism. To suddenly have to focus on all of the negatives ...was hard to do. I felt bad about it as I like the trainee on a personal level and went above and beyond the call of duty to support him in his placement...”*

## Positioning

If one accepts there is a community of practice in our teacher training provision, I argue that the mentor’s assigned position remains peripheral to the community, whatever government policy expectations were envisaged, which is perhaps why two mentors adopted their own idiosyncratic coping strategies. The adjustments in responsibility described in the new programme had positioned them as a fully participating member but in actual practice this was not the case. As the later critiques of Wenger (2003) show, there are considerable uncertainties about where the lines are drawn at the boundaries of the community, especially in relation to their evolving identities in the new world brought on by the reforms of Initial Teacher Training. What seems clear is that there needs to be much more clarity in the reification of the mentor’s status. In relation to the case studies, the language used in the mentors’ comments revealed feelings of being ‘*professionally compromised, frustrated, unsettling, distracting*’, so it could be argued that this reveals tensions even where, as can be seen above, resolutions were found. The case studies demonstrate not only the mentors’ anxieties, but how each negotiated a resolution using different strategies when confronted with failing their mentee. The situation of possible failure by a mentor therefore provokes, as the case studies reveal, a ‘*professionally challenging*’ situation with ‘*cases where workers have to negotiate about the unanticipated boundaries of their work*’ (Fenwick et al, 2006: p. 3).

Burr’s (2010: p. 111) ideas on positioning and subject positions are useful here in that she uses an analogy that identity can be produced if we ‘*take on board ideologies where we recognise ourselves in that ideology*’. We can either resist or

accept them, but there are obligations attached to these positions. From this view, Burr refers to a person's endeavour to locate themselves within particular discourses during social interaction which, as I suggest, mentors did in different ways. Therefore the mentors may have had difficulties of '*positioning*' themselves with different discourses in the interplay of simultaneous supportive mentor and critical assessor roles (Burr, 2010: p. 116).

Within the climate described above, I suggest that mentors not only position themselves within the role of a humanistic discourse as enabler, as one mentor revealed by the 'trial runs', but unintentionally position themselves, and are positioned, as subordinate to tutors and others at the university. This is evidenced by separate geographical location and by their social positioning in this community where they had little or no agency in shaping the programme. Further, although mentors complete half of all the observations I suggest that there is an implicit subordination of their status because they are expected to indicate simply a pass or fail, whereas university tutors' observations are graded on a scale of 1-4 that permits a more sophisticated evaluation of the trainee's performance. Therefore it is these issues, the '*subtle interweaving of many different threads*' of this discourse (Burr, 2010: p. 106) that perhaps suggests an unequal relationship between the university tutors and mentors.

At the time of this research, the experience of mentors revealed minimal interaction with the personal tutor and from other staff members, in this sensitive process, as the following quote highlights:

**Case 3.** "[I] felt unsupported by the university staff [as there was] no communication for four weeks...a lack of follow up from the university."

The university and the institutions are bound together mainly by the need for placing trainees and the payment given by the university to Further Education colleges. The colleges and the university are discrete entities, as illustrated by Owen-Pugh (2007: p. 89) in her analysis of relationships between athletes and coaches, where she suggests that Wenger's (2003) ideas neglect disputes that occur at the boundaries of the community, which are not necessarily always a collective empowerment, as illustrated in the above quote.

This unexpected outcome reveals a need to sharpen direct communicative channels between mentors and personal tutors which, at the time of writing, the present apparatus appears to have neglected.

#### *Assessment of teaching practice*

Within the programme under discussion, the two earlier observations are carried out by an academic tutor at the half-term point. They can last for as little as half an hour and during this time frame took place through the first term when typically some of the trainees had 30 hours of teaching experience (see *Placement Policy* document, p. 13). However, some have had considerably less teaching opportunities for a variety of reasons and thus can be disadvantaged. Further, some trainees may not be strong candidates. They may have a limited repertoire of skills and move on a slower trajectory of competence, which often results in organisational reluctance to allow such trainees sufficient independence in their classes. High levels of professional surveillance continue, which further impedes independent professional development. A longer developmental trajectory in the judgement of assessment of practice is at odds with the necessary grading identified by the published criteria of LLUK Standards (Rammel, 2004), and which must occur within such a short time frame. This takes place within a professional context that expects trainees to achieve continually improved numerical grades and on the tutor to award them.

The negotiated meanings involved in training and assessment of practice contain many complexities. In her research on assessment of required tasks, Hawe (2002) has suggested that there is a disjuncture between rhetoric and practice with regard to this process. She said that '*rather than basing judgements on published criteria and standards, a group of assessors grounded their judgements in a different set of rules*' (Hawe, 2002: p. 93) and she cites McCallum et al (1995: cited in Hawe, p. 102) whose research on teachers revealed that there were three types of assessors. First, there are what he labels '*evidence gatherers*' who are systematic planners, and second, '*intuitive*' where judgements are based on '*autonomy and professional judgements, gut reaction*'. The third category relies on participation, commitment, attitude, time, level of improvement and personal qualities of the person being assessed. Hawe (2002: p. 103) concluded that there may be a conflict between the role of assessor '*[as] ...humanist and... technocrat*'. This echoes Claxton et al's (1996) psychological view, which identifies the '*twin roles as enabler and assessor*' of their mentee's teaching practice (Claxton et al, 1996: p. 244). More recently, Cullimore and Simmons (2010: p. 228) have highlighted '*tensions*' caused by the need to balance the '*varied roles*' and Tedder and Lawy (2009: p. 1) and [the] '*uncertainty that surround[s] mentoring*'. It would seem that these '*sensitivities ... regime[s] of accountability*' using Wenger's lens (2003: p. 81), have perhaps not yet been fully negotiated and worked out in practice.

The rhetoric of published criteria reforms for post compulsory teacher trainees' teaching performance is measured against clearly defined standards of achievement and competence as programmes that mechanically 'map' the standards (Lucas, 2007: p. 94). The intention was that this should facilitate consistency among assessors who are making qualitative judgements against students' performance. But as the work of McCallum et al (cited in Hawe, 2002) suggests, assessing practice is complex which John (1996, cited in Claxton et al, 1996: p. 90) reiterates:

*‘...implicit theories that teachers hold on teaching are tacit and not neat constructions and complete reproductions of...’*  
(LLUK, 2007)

Similarly, Wenger (2003: p. 134) refers to a *‘knowing in practice’* and Claxton et al (1996) suggest that knowing should not be subsumed under instrumental purpose, but should retain a broader connection to being human. With regard to the teacher training programme under discussion, Wenger’s approach would suggest that tutors, mentors, mentees and significant others need more social action of sharing notes in a negotiated understanding of ideas, where the tacit *‘knowing in practice’* would therefore be revealed and reified, and no longer undefined. This discussion on knowing is important as Claxton and Atkinson (2000: p. 119) suggest: *‘importantly, mentors need to realise that to rely on their trained intuition is a sign of professional confidence and competence and not a second rate tool.’*

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The significance of the sequence of the observations, and which professional observes when in the time line of such a condensed programme, is one of the findings of this paper. A failed teaching session at the end of stage one of the programme creates a disproportionate liability and responsibility on the professional carrying out the observation, especially since a failed second attempt results in the likelihood of the trainee having to leave the programme. These third and fourth observations are carried out by the placement provider’s mentor who is not a member of the university and who, as discussed above, is perhaps marginal and peripheral within the community. This can create difficulties because the consequence of failure falls to the mentor. The paper further reveals issues relating to the power relations between the professional members and how the mentors have been unintentionally unfairly positioned (Burr, 2010: p. 111 - 14).

In line with the policy reforms to raise standards, I suggest that mentors should explicitly have permission to fail; otherwise trainees who are not sufficiently competent and fully skilled may nevertheless achieve a licence to practise. This would undermine the essential rationale of the reforms implemented and imposed on Teacher Educators in the first place. However, the reluctance of mentors to initiate the stigma of failure produce, as cases 1 and 2 suggest, *‘extensive pre-observation support’*, *‘trial runs’* and other strategies, which infer that such intuition sits uneasily with their mentoring function.

Both university tutors and mentors share the load of the observations but they are not mutually accountable because although this is a joint enterprise, each observation has a discrete entity and meanings are therefore not integrated and consequently not reified (Wenger, 2003). As already discussed from the mentor’s comments there was some, *‘frustration’*, and it was *‘quite unsettling...’*. This suggests an association with feelings of tension because the act of failing the trainee also implies a concurrent implication that the mentor has failed in their enabling and supporting function. A failed trainee may imply a failed mentor. This dilemma, represented in this paper, is a further revelation. I therefore suggest that the density of involvement and attachment between team members needs to be reinforced at this time. If one imagines there is a community, this seems now to have been naïve in relation to the process of failing observations in such a dispersed community. Of pivotal influence is the liaison between the personal academic tutor and the mentor when remedial work is required following a failed observation.

Other ambiguities can compound the problem because early observation assessments contain diagnostic, developmental and supportive elements which signpost the future emphasis of effort the trainee needs in order to progress sufficiently. There is, however, an underpinning programme imperative that all observations need to fully meet the LLUK criteria for a pass. Disparity of opinion between mentor and tutor illustrated by the following reveals that the demonstration of sufficiency in relation to skills competence remains problematic. *“I felt the trainee should have failed her first observation...and when she was passed I was surprised...[and] that may have highlighted [these recurring] problems early on.”*

As the comment above indicates there are inherent contradictions between tutors and mentors which arise as a result of this new added dimension to the lexicon of training. For example how does one determine the balance between judgements of enabling with those of assessing, and to what extent should *‘trial runs’* be countenanced? A similar parallel has been noted in relation to the submission of trial *‘drafts’* of written assignments. Further, what proportion of developmental allowances should be made for trainees to achieve a successful pass with further expectation that trainees will achieve grades *‘2’* and *‘1’* in the future sequence of observations? Therefore the final outcome of this research suggests a much closer analysis and further scrutiny of the boundaries between developmental/diagnostic, and graded assessment of performance needs further investigation.

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